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AUTHOR Yao, Esther Lee
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the effect of the family environment on a child's bilingual development, specifically the middle-class Chinese American. The sample consisted of 86 parents attending a show celebrating the Chinese New Year in Houston, Texas. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire consisting of 24 items dealing with parent's and children's demographic data, children's early language experience, parent's expectations, and the degree of bilingualism in the home. It was found that the majority of the parents spoke Chinese with their children in the home; more than half taught their children the English alphabet prior to kindergarten; and a majority claimed that their children had no learning or social problems in kindergarten. Furthermore, three-quarters of the parents said that their children's reading ability in school was good. It is concluded that the role of the family environment in children's bilingualism cannot be completely separated from external language influences such as TV, reading materials, and social contacts. Unless these factors can be completely controlled or excluded, the role of the family cannot be determined. Imitation and reinforcement are found to play an important part in English acquisition even though 87% of the sample's first language was Chinese. It is possible, however, that parental education and economic conditions provide a favorable environment for the children's English acquisition. (CG)

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Family Environment for Children's Bilingual Development - A Case of Middle-Class Chinese Americans

Presented by

Esther Lee Yao, Ph.D.
University of Houston at Clear Lake City
2700 Bay Area Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77058

at

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Family Environment for Children's Bilingual Development -

A Case of Middle-Class Chinese Americans

The Chinese population in the United States has undergone tremendous changes both in quantity and quality since the first immigrants began arriving during the middle of the 19th century. The number of professionals has steadily increased as a result of economic gains, educational betterment and an influx of well-educated Chinese immigrants to the promised land during the past two decades. The brain-drain age has been further reinforced by the U.S. Immigration Act of 1967 which abolished the quota system for immigrants from the eastern hemisphere. According to the 1970 census, the number of Chinese Americans, 431,583, increased 83% over the 1960 figure. The figure from the 1980 census is nearly double, 806,000, mainly due to immigration (Bureau of the Census, 1960, 1970 and 1980).

Because of this changing composition in the Chinese population, the language background of young children entering American schools for the first time varies from those who do not speak English to those who were born in a monolingual family and whose sole language is English. This phenomenon creates an interesting profile of Chinese-American learners and makes the teaching task more challenging to teachers. Teachers often encounter Chinese-American students with varying degrees of language capacity; some are bilingual Chinese-American students, some are monolingual, either in Chinese or in English. In addition, bilingual children frequently become monolingual as they grow older and/or separate from their Chinese-speaking parents. In other words, as a result of

social influence, Chinese-American children tend to lose their Chinese proficiency as time goes by. To help teachers gain a better understanding of this possible change, this paper intends to examine the family background of Chinese-American children and their early language experience in relation to their bilingual retention.

There are several theories on first-language acquisition, some scholars believe these theories can apply to second-language acquisition as well. Many people have long believed that is the best means for first language acquisition. The behavorists (Skinner, 1957) are convinced that the first language is acquired through reinforcement. The theory of nativistic and cognitive abilities was first stimulated by Chomsky (1965) who believed that human beings have an innate component to use as a language acquisition device (LAD) for learning language skills. Cognitive theorists feel that children are born with the mental ability to learn the language. All these above-mentioned theories or models have been challenged by researchers and form their own conceptual framework, even for second language acquisition.

Despite the fact that some scholars believe that children have the same process for second-language acquisition as their first one (Brown-Ervin, 1973, Tripp, 1974, Macnamara, 1976 and Slobin, 1971) differences do exist. It is evident that the two processes differ greatly due to chronological time in the life of the individual and his situation at the time of learning the language (Chastain, 1976). However, simultaneous acquisition of two languages does not differ significantly from the acquisition of a single language (Swain, 1972). Another factor is the characteristic of the second language. If the first language is very

different from the second language, like English and Chinese, little transfer learning will occur. The last but not least variable is the sociological setting which affects the dominance of either first or second language (Cazden, 1970, 1972a, 1972b, Fishman, 1972 and Labov, 1972). Therefore, the use of two languages is seldom balanced.

Since it is rare to have the true balanced skills of two languages (Fishman, 1966 and Mackey, 1977) there are different definitions of bilingualism. The term incipient bilingualism refers to the initial learning stage of a second language (Diebold, 1961). Kachru (1965) conceptualizes bilingualism as existing on a cline, or continuum with a zero point at one end of the cline representing the competency in one language, and the other extreme end representing ambilingualism on native-like control of two languages. Mackey (1977) and Fishman (1966) both consider that absolute mastery of two languages is unrealistic. Bilingualism is defined by Mackey (1977) as the alternate use of two languages by the same individual, by Fishman (1966) as "demonstrated ability to engage in communication via more than one language" (p. 122). Haugen (1969) describes a bilingual person as one who can produce meaningful sentences in a second language. Macnamara's (1967) definition of bilingualism is more specific: the possession of at least one of the language skills - listening, speaking, reading or writing - in a second language even to a minimal degree.

With the above definitions in mind, this researcher decided to select her sample without any formal assessment for bilingual proficiency. Instead, the sample was selected based merely on their bilingual background. Meanwhile, the scope of this project was delineated in accordance to the

theoretical framework of imitation and reinforcement models for language acquisition. Based on Chastain's recommendation (1976) it seems that the theories of imitation and conditioning are more applicable than other theories and tend to play a more important role in teaching a second language. Questions like; does a child's early language experience affect his/her bilingual development, either increasing or diminishing? does parent's language background or expectations affect their children's bilingual development? what are the variables affecting the retainment of a child's bilingual proficiency?

METHOD

Sample:

Eighty-six parents participated in this study. They were the audience of a show celebrating the Chinese New Year in Houston and were asked to assist in this project by filling out a questionnaire. Because of the nature of the show, it was the most ideal place to select bilingual parents who at least possess minimum skills in English. Although only the first child of each family was included in this study, the researcher obtained information on all of the children in each family.

Among these first borns, 50.9% were boys and 49.1% were girls, with an average age of 9.2 years. A majority of them were born in the U.S. (71.9%). Of those not born in the U.S., their average number of years of residence in this country were 6.4. Ninety percent of the parents had a college education.

Instrument:

A questionnaire consisting of 24 items deals with parents and children's demographic data, children's early language experience, parent's

expectation and the degree of billingualism at home. Children's early experiences include their nursery experience, the first language learned, the language of his caretaker, the language used between parents and children for story telling, English learning before kindergarten, language used with playmates, and other learning or social problems. The parents' part was examined by items related to the language used between parents attending Chinese class. Regardless of the child's early experience, the questionnaire also reveals the child's reading ability and the language presently used for communication at home and outside the home.

Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis:

The researcher passed out 750 questionnaires to the audience of a Chinese New Year event. They were asked to return the completed form anomyously in a self-addressed, stamped envelope furnished by the researcher. The return rate was lower than expected. The returned questionnaries were first tallied according to the responses of each item, then chi square was administered for those items which had more even distribution of the frequency. It was hope to determine whether some independent variables affect children's bilingual development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the tally of the sample's response, it is found that the sample was homogeneous in some respects. Consequently, it is inappropriate to conduct statistical analyses in the following areas: first, a great majority of the sample (87%) had Chinese as their first language. Secondly, nearly three quarters of the childtakers (73.5%), either at home or outside the home were Chinese speaking. Thirdly, most of the

mothers (72.7%) and fathers (72.5%) spoke chinese to their children at home. On the contrary, more than half of the parents taught the English alphabet to their children prior to kindergarten (56.5%) and started English story telling at an average age of 2.3 years. Surprisingly, a majority of the parents (67.8%) claimed that their children had no learning difficulties or social problems in kindergarten. Furthermore, three-fourths of the parents pointed out that their children's reading ability in school was good. Nevertheless, most of the parents (80%) still spoke Chinese between themselves. None of them had a negative response when they were asked whether they wanted their children to be able to speak both Chinese and English for various reasons.

Based on the above results some conclusions can be drawn with some interpretations.

Like any other ethnic groups, Chinese immigrant parents tend to maintain their language at home, including childtakers. Although Chinese was the dominant language used by the majority of the sample before their children began kindergarten, the children seemed to funcion well in school. There are three possible explanations for such results. First, English could easily be taught to Chinese-speaking children through TV programs at home. Thus, they were not totally deprived from learning English via mass media. Early exposure to the second language positively encourages cognitive flexibility and verbal creativity (Cummins and Gulutsan, 1974, Lambert, Tucker and d'Anglejan, 1973). Theories about the "optimal" age for learning languate (Penfield, 1967), about specialization and lateralization of brain function at a given age (Kinsbourne, 1975, Witelson and Palie, 1973) and the possibility of developing competence in two languages side by side seem to be applicable to this study. Children's well-doing in school may just

reflect parents' high expectation of academic excellence and insensitivity to children's struggles in school (Yao, 1979). Or the selected parents simply tended to present the best picture of their children to justify their own child-rearing techniques.

Nevertheless, there are other aspects of the sample's responses which were not as homogeneous as the above-mentioned areas. These aspects were analyzed by chi-square (X^2) with some independent variables. The independent variables which tie into family environment include children's nursery experience, language used by parents for story telling, language of playmates prior to kindergarten, parents' education and the parents' length of time in the U.S. before the first child was born. The dependent variables are the language in which a child speaks to parents, child's present dominant language and whether attending Chinese language class or not.

Children's nursery experience is found to be insignificant in relating to their dominant language, whether Chinese or English, to the language they speak to their parents, and to their attendance to Chinese class. This insignificance may be due to the high percentage of the sample who had nursery experience (69.1%). Thus it is difficult to conclude that early exposure to the American learning environment plays a vital role in a child's dominant language. However, the result suggests that early natural immersion does help the acquisition of a second language (Leopold, 1976).

Storytelling in English does affect a child's dominant language and the language he uses to speak to his parents. According to the analysis of chi-square, story telling significantly ties to the sample's present language at .01 level (Table I). It means if story telling to

TABLE 1

Chi-square of selected dependent and independent variables

Dependent Variables / Independent Variables	Dominant Language	Language to Parents	Chinese Class
Age	18.9*	13.8	4.7
Sex	1.0	0.1	0.4
Birthplace	8.1	5.2	2.7
Residence	13.3	15.0	9.3
Nursery	11.1	3.3	5.9
Story telling	19.6**	22.5**	8.2
Playmates	22.7**	25.2**	9.0

*$p < 0.05$

**$p < 0.01$

a child was in English then, the child's prime language tended to be English. Besides story telling, the language of the sample's playmates prior to nursery school is also a very important factor highly related to the sample's dominant language as shown in the same table. If a child used Chinese with playmates prior to kindergarten, he tended to maintain Chinese as a dominant language even up to the present. This supports the role of social influences studied by Fillmore (1976) cited in McLaughlin's book (1978, pp. 108-110).

The other demographic variables play an insignificant role in the sample's use of language, except the age of the sample (Table I), it seems that younger children have the tendency to have Chinese as their dominant language. Once children become older, they either use English only all the time, or use both Chinese and English equally. Sex, birthplace and nursery experience were not found to significantly relate to the sample's use of language and Chinese class attendance.

There are several explanations for the insignificance of family environment for sample's bilingualism. There are various definitions for bilingualism as discussed in the beginning of this paper. Here the researcher adopts Macnamara's definition (1967) which says all the sample are bilingual except to the degree where bilingualism was different. The interpretations for the evidence that bilingual family environment has little to do with children's late dominant language and/or English acquisition are discussed in the following section.

First, this research study was conducted among a very homogeneous group at least, only those parents who were concerned about their children's experience responded to the questionnaire. Forty-two percent of them had their first child five years after they arrived in the U.S.

while 35% of them waited 2-4 years for their first child's birth. This implies that they were well prepared, not only educationally but also psychologically and financially for their settlement in the U.S. Most likely, they were ready for their children's arrival and for their children's educational inspiration, including bilingual development. The effects of socio-economic status on progress in second language learning and school achievement are well documented (Barstall et al., 1974, Douglas, 1964).

Secondly, as a result of their social and economic status, the parents tend to be more open minded and probably more adaptive to the American lifestyle. Thus, their children suffer very little cultural and language deprivation. Even though most of the parents (80%) conversed in Chinese between themselves, they were less likely to have communication problems with their offspring if they conversed in English. Therefore, children's English acquisition was not hindered.

Thirdly, other language learning opportunities were available to these children whose prime language was Chinese prior to schooling. Again, because of parental economic conditions, children have the access to TV programs, story telling in English and English speaking playmates. Consequently, no matter how recent their arrival in the U.S., childtakers' language,children still tend to have good English reading competency and end up with English as their prime language.

Sixty-two (90%) of the children attended Chinese class which did not significantly relate to any other variables. Although nearly all parents were truly for bilingualism, not all the parents sent their children to Chinese class. Some of the given reasons are: inavailability, inconvenience and a lack of interest.

In conclusion, it seems that the role of family environment in children's bilingualism cannot be completely separated from the external language influences, such as TV, reading materials and social contacts. Unless the external factors can be totally controlled or excluded, the role of family in relation to children's bilingual development, both Chinese retainment and English acquisition cannot be determined. Based on the analyzed data, imitation and reinforcement--either internal or external factors are found to play an important part in English acquisition even though 87% of the sample's first language was Chinese. Nevertheless, it is possible that parental education and economic conditions have provided a very favorable environment for children's English acquisition. Further research studies on more diverse socioeconomic groups are recommended in order to gain a better understanding of the parental role in children's bilingual development.

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